

In beauty's delicate embrace

Andrew Stephens



Ranjani Shettar's Art installation at the NGV
Installing the Ranjani Shettar show at The National Gallery of Victoria.

RANJANI Shettar carefully unpacks a box containing large, carved hunks of wood. They are fat, weighty things, a bit like bones, and they are beginning to crack with age. Soon they will be floating in the air, looking luminous and almost weightless. Shettar, it seems, has a peculiar gift: to make things airy and graceful, suspending them in space as if by telekinesis and bestowing them with a curious light.

In her studio, she has an abundance of natural light. She lives in an upstairs apartment but her ground-floor studio (which she shares with her husband Srinivasa, also an artist), is where she absorbs the wondrous effects of light. Like dust particles suspended in that light, most of her enormous sculptural installations are rarely still: eddies of air are generated by viewers and the artworks glide and dance, producing unrepeatable shadows.

It is art that is in constant flux: every viewer gets their own experience of it.

Here at the National Gallery of Victoria's new contemporary art space - a redesigned set of galleries dedicated to local and international art shows - Shettar has been installing the work in what is, for the NGV, a long lead-time.

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Because of the complicated nature of her suspended works, she and her husband and a team of installers have been turning the white spaces into something glorious. While one team has been drilling thousands of tiny holes into two adjoining walls for the work *Touch Me Not* (2006-07), Shettar has been busy around the corner in another space putting together *Sun-sneezers Blow Light Bubbles* (2007-08).

It is an intriguing title and Shettar explains that light, again, is the source of her inquiries.

The flowing metal armatures are fairy-like in their delicacy and Shettar wanted a gauze-like skin upon them that would capture an interaction with the light.

She thought of rawhide during her research but had to find something else because she doesn't subscribe to using animal products in her work - "by using it, whether you mean to or not, it has a message", she says.

She settled on muslin drenched in thick tamarind seed paste. Stained gently with shellac, the results are light-filled and glowing.

For each work, she says, there is a journey during which she goes "through my own little process" of working out the most effective way to make something.

Several times, this has meant calling on toymakers in the Indian city where she lives (Bangalore) and asking them for their trade secrets: the tamarind kernel paste, for example, was something she discovered through these craftsmen, it being part of their traditional way of making things.

"You grow up and you see these things around you," Shettar says. "Whether you absorb them consciously or not, it doesn't matter: they emerge later. I didn't know this knowledge would come in useful."

This is an artist who has always been curious about how things get made - and for those visiting her mesmerising installations at the gallery, it will be a challenge to work out precisely how she has constructed the work.

For the three weeks of the installation, the gallery mounted a time-lapse camera in situ, the footage from which might convey the massive amount of painstaking labour involved in constructing such a show.

For *Touch me not*, Shettar disassembled two walls that had been built in her studio, cut them into squares and had them shipped to Melbourne. On each of the panels are hundreds of holes, numbered carefully. The numbers correspond with little balls of wood attached to stalks that fit into each of the holes.

On the rear side of each ball, where viewers can't see, Shettar has written in pencil a corresponding number, inscribed in such a tiny script it is barely legible.

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When each component is mounted, it looks like a flurry of golden sand blowing about in water at the beach, the light giving it a honey glow.

As the gallery's senior curator of contemporary art Alex Baker says, Shettar's abiding interest is in the relationship of water and light to living things, "transforming natural phenomena into magical forms".

While many of the materials Shettar uses come from or are inspired by her immediate environment in India - the neem wood for *Transitions* (2003), tamarind kernel paste for *Sun-sneezers*, acacia wood and handcrafted beads - she strongly resists having her identity contained by nationhood.

She once told an interviewer for the 55th international exhibition at the Carnegie Museum of Art that while there is sometimes an expectation to see "Indian qualities" in the art coming from her homeland, this is unfair, something that is not applied to North American or European work. Baker, in his catalogue for Shettar's exhibition - poetically titled *Dewdrops and Sunshine* - says the artist's engagement with environmental concerns, high-tech economies, contemporary issues and Indian identity is subtle, even oblique. More than that, he says that on an international scale her work stands out in a "terrain of contemporary sculpture and installation art, which is rife with, on the one hand, found-object one-liners and on the other a dizzying array of outsourced fabrications".

It is perhaps her openness to spontaneity and the chance happening of things that gives her work this poetic resonance. Talking about the neem wood lumps in *Transitions*, for instance, she explains their slow cracking over time is something she welcomes because, after all, everything is ephemeral. Even bronzes, enduring as they might for many centuries, will one day be dust.

This welcoming of entropy naturally leads to embracing other nuanced levels of meaning in these materials.

In Indian culture, she explains, neem leaves - which are bitter to the taste - are sometimes combined with sweet jaggery, the combination being representative of taking "life's joys and sorrows in the same stride". That sort of complexity is why her *Sun-sneezers* is so beguiling, referencing those many people who, on entering bright light, have a genetic tendency to start sneezing.

It is, she says, light-hearted and full of joy as she tries to imagine what a "sun-sneeze", as she calls it, might do to the surrounding air were we able to see such a thing.

Here, amid the delicate bubble-like forms designed to slowly whirl in the air we move around, such a thing seems entirely possible. With it, there is a twinge of sorrow: if only we could be enveloped by such beauty *all* the time.

■ *Dewdrops and Sunshine* is at the National Gallery of Victoria, St Kilda Road, from November 4 to February 26. ngv.vic.gov.au